

8

"DADAH" IS DEATH : A BURKEAN ANALYSIS

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Foss, Foss and Trapp (1985) state that one of Burke's major contributions to rhetoric is his reaffirmation of the importance of rhetoric; that it is the very center of life, underlying all human activities, and one with all human symbolic actions. Based upon this Burkean viewpoint about rhetoric, I argue that "*Dadah*¹ is death," a CBS three-part mini series, is a rhetorical act of the producer that implicates the backwardness, and thus worthlessness, of capital punishment in today's world, and in the process implicates eastern culture as well.

Background

In the early morning of July 9, 1986, two Australian citizens, Brian Chambers and Kevin Barlow, were hanged at the Pudu Prison, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Earlier, Chambers and Barlow had been caught with possession of a large amount of heroin at one of the international airports in Malaysia. Months and months of trial, at various levels of the Malaysian judicial system - from the magistrate court right up to the Supreme Council - proved futile for Chambers and Barlow. Even government-to-government negotiations failed.

Various efforts by Barlow's mother to get her son acquitted, also ended in despair. The Malaysian courts found them guilty, and according to the law of the land, the penalty for smuggling, pushing or trafficking illegal drugs is mandatory death. Chambers and Barlow became the first Caucasians to be persecuted under that law. This immediately became a media issue, especially in Australia, Britain and New Zealand. Malaysia thus came to be labeled as "uncivilized," "primitive" and "backward." The rhetoric of backwardness had just begun.

Analysis

The CBS mini series, "*Dadah is death*" is a continuation of the same rhetoric. It can be

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viewed from the Burkean pentad at two interrelated levels. The Burkean pentad consists of five key terms used to discover the motives in every symbolic action (See Figure 1). These terms are "act", "agent", "agency", "scene" and "purpose". In a nutshell, Burke explains that every symbolic action has an *act*, that is, a conscious or purposive action, a *scene* which is the situation or the context of the action, an *agent* or the individual performing the act, an *agency* or the means used to accomplish the act, and a *purpose* or the intention of the individual for performing the act. The Burkean pentad operates at the nested levels of content and form.

As content, "*Dadah is death*" portrays the drama of Barbara Barlow (agent), initiating ways and means (act), by using legal (such as appeals in various courts) or illegal (for example, by hiring mercenaries) methods (agency), to free her son from a hanging sentence (purpose) in a foreign country where death is the penalty for serious drug offenses (scene). As form, "*Dadah is death*" is a television movie (agency) used by (act) the producer (agent) to protest against capital punishment and elicit sympathy from viewers (purpose) by highlighting the fighting spirit and daring actions of a courageous Australian mother who attempted to get her son acquitted from a hanging sentence in a strange, unfamiliar country where mandatory death is the penalty for serious drug offenses such as smuggling (scene). But form and content cannot be separated (Burke, 1950; Burke, 1966), thus the movie and its content is one rhetorical work. The interaction of its form and its content leads to identification or persuasion.

Television movies have a major advantage over most other mass media forms, in the sense that camera lenses can capture scenes that can be united to tell only one side of the story. Similarly, their scripts permit selection of the central focus of the story or plot. In short, the agency, "television movie", is also a formal device which can select and highlight information, and obscure or downplay some other information, so as to convey a single message. In discussing language as a symbolic action, Burke (1966, p.45) states that "even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent, it must function also as a deflection of reality." The script and visual images, as a terministic screen of television, function likewise in "*Dadah is death*." It does not at all tell the Malaysian view of the seriousness of the crime committed by Chambers and Barlow. It does not explain the Malaysian reasoning for the death sentence, and it does not lead the viewer to understand the necessity of capital punishment for drug smuggling. That "reality" was "deflected" from the script.

Instead, the "reality" that was "selected" reflected a grim, dirty, corrupted, slow and almost lethargic, militant Malaysia. The camera looked for a big, fat and ugly rat at the prison where Chambers and Barlow were held. At the prison, the inmates had to cook their own food (not a fact), and painted-faced prostitutes were brought in for Chambers and Barlow the night before they were hanged (another non-fact). The streets of Penang were dirty, narrow and cobble-stoned, crowded, and all over there were faces of poverty and despair.² The camera captured in close-up a yawning, tired old man with bloodshot eyes. At the Bayan Lepas International Airport (so it seems), policemen and airport security officers were patrolling with machine guns (certainly an untruthful portrayal of a country which capitalizes on tourism as a source of income, thus will not "scare off" tourists by having machine gun-equipped police at airports). Such depictions of the scene is a powerful rhetorical act for it immediately envisions for the unknowing audience an underdeveloped Asian and a corrupted Muslim country preoccupied with haggling strange foreigners. Hence, the producer successfully continued the rhetoric of

backwardness that was started by the print media in Australia, Britain and New Zealand at the time of the Chambers and Barlow trial.

Of a greater rhetorical implication is the question that was posed in the mini series. In a poignant scene, Barbara Barlow asked Malaysian journalists "What have we learnt? (from the hanging)". The suitability and appropriateness of capital punishment in the modern world is immediately questioned. This act serves two basic functions of identification. Barbara Barlow is a symbol of the western fighting spirit ("I'll show this country what a fighting woman is," she uttered), questioning the worthlessness of capital punishment and inviting an intellectual debate on the issue. The audience in the western and progressive world is at once identified with Barbara. And the common enemy, the one that they are fighting against, is capital punishment practiced in a legal system of an eastern country that time has left far behind. The tension between the progressive, western world and the backward eastern world is highlighted with this scene. Barbara's usage of the term "we" in front of the journalists is itself an unconscious identification strategy. It was Barbara's last effort at the very last hour before the hanging of Chambers and Barlow to gain media support and sympathy for the acquittal of her son.

In *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), Burke also addresses self as audience. This is true in the case of the producer. "Dadah is death" is an identification that functions for him as a means to an end. By focussing on Barbara Barlow's courageous and daring effort, yet failed attempt, to free her son, the producer is engaged in a rhetoric of "rebirth" in the dramatic process of guilt-purification-redemption. He, like most other contemporary westerners, namely in Australia, Britain and New Zealand, had failed to stop the execution of his fellowmen ("They're just boys," pleaded Barbara). As a result, he is guilty. The act of making the television mini series is his attempt at purification - to clear himself of his guilt. This was accomplished through victimage. Victimage is the principle of scapegoating where a victim is selected to be the representative of unwanted evils and loaded with the guilt of the victimizer (Burke, 1941; Burke, 1966). Malaysia, depicted as backward and indifferent about hanging drug offenders, is the scapegoat.

The dramatic process is completed with the end of the mini series. Upon returning to Australia, a few days after her son, Kevin, was hanged, Barbara Barlow received an air letter from Kevin, which was written just before he was taken for his execution, informing explicitly of his "acceptance" of the fate before him. Her other son, Andrew, asked her, "What is it, Mom?" She replied with a smile, "I have just received a letter from heaven." Kevin's "acceptance" is an identification strategy, where satisfaction and order of this life is achieved. This is symbolic of the producer feeling satisfied with what he has tried to achieve by making this movie. This is redemption. Of a more significant redemptive act is Barbara's utterance "a letter from heaven" as she looked up toward the sky. This is the ultimate redemption from eternal guilt. Redemption could be found in the change of identity, a new perspective, a different view of life, or a "feeling of moving forward towards a goal," or better life in general (Rueckert, 1982). Thus, even though Kevin Barlow was hanged to death, he is still a winner for his soul is in "heaven." At a higher level of abstraction, this ultimate redemption is symbolic of the notion that the progressive western world is always the ultimate victor over the backward eastern world.

Footnotes

1. *Dadah* is the Malaysian terminology for illegal and harmful drugs, as opposed to *ubat* which is drugs prescribed or consumed for medicinal purposes. It is interesting to note that the existence of the word in the Malaysian language serves a rhetorical function. To borrow Burke's term, it is the conception of the "negative" which enables moral action in a society. The ability to distinguish between right and wrong is a consequence of the concept of the negative. Without the negative in language, moral action would not exist (Burke, 1961).
2. According to *TV Guide* (the edition during which the first part of the mini series was aired), the location shooting was done in Macau. Some of the shots of Malaysia appeared to be clippings from some old film footage - this is obvious from signage systems on the roads and tourist spots that has the old spelling system of the Malaysian language used. The fact that the location shooting was done in Macau is indicated by the licence plates on cars and taxis. In Penang, Malaysia, the license plate on cars begin with the letter "P", and in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, the car plates begin with either "W" or "B" and on taxis, the plate begins with "HB" or "HW". In the mini series, both cars and taxis carry license plates that begin with "M".

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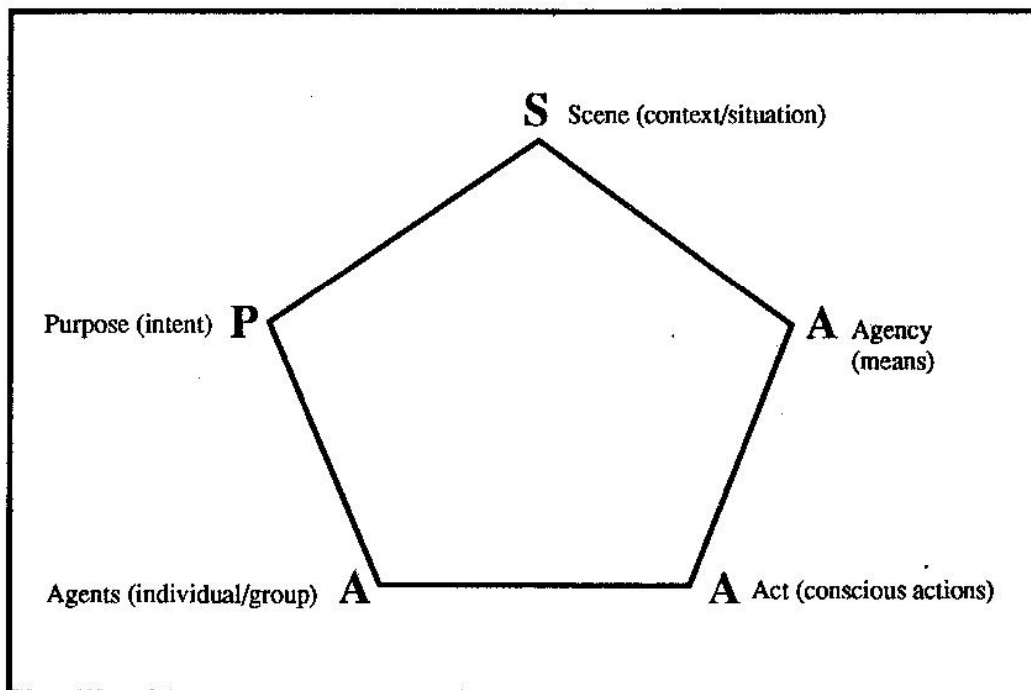


Figure 1 : The Burkean Pentad